



Leviathan to *Lucifer*: What Biblical Monsters (Still) Reveal

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journals.sagepub.com/home/int**Kelly J. Murphy**

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Abstract

Monsters and the monstrous show up in Scripture and outside the pages of Scripture. Two of the most famous biblical monsters—Leviathan and Satan—appear and reappear in different forms, and, at times, their stories are merged into one. A focus on Leviathan and Satan in Scripture helps readers to see the different ways the biblical texts depict monsters and, especially, the relationship between humans, monsters, and the divine. As these creatures (re)appear in popular culture, often drawing on their scriptural representations, they continue to provide a space for audiences to ask: what makes a monster and what do these monsters reveal?

Keywords

Devil; Job, Book of; Leviathan; Lucifer; Monsters; Monster Theory; Satan

Monster Problems, Monster Potentials, and the Bible

The problem with monsters—beyond, of course, their fangs, horns, many heads, or noodly appendages—is that the monstrous is difficult to categorize. What *makes* something—or someone—a monster?

Scholars who think about how and why cultures create monsters—often using an approach now called “monster theory”—regularly note that it is not simply a physical form that makes a monster (hybridity, the ability to shape shift, or having too many heads) or even an action (drinking blood, consuming human flesh, or trampling cities).¹ Rather, monsters prompt a certain response in those who encounter them. For example, Timothy K. Beal writes how monsters often produce

1 Readers are pointed to a number of important works that attempt to make sense of monsters and the monstrous, including Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s foundational article “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25. Additional works include Stephen T. Asma’s *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Additionally, Brandon R. Grafius provides a thorough introduction to horror theory and monster theory, especially as they have begun to be applied to biblical studies in “Text and Terror: Monster Theory and the Hebrew Bible,” in *Currents in Biblical Research* 16 (October 2017): 34–49.

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an “*experience* of horror,” that, like religious experiences, “are often characterized as an encounter with mysterious otherness that elicits a vertigo-like combination of both fear and desire, repulsion and attraction.”² As Noël Carroll observes, monsters “are cognitively threatening,” challenging us to rethink what we think we know.³ Moreover, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, “the monster is born ... as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.”⁴ Yet “no monster tastes of death but once”; rather, once slain, monsters somehow escape and reappear in new settings.⁵ As one example, Cohen points to the many iterations of the vampire, like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* or Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, noting how “in each of these vampire stories, the undead returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event.”⁶ In these ways, monsters also provide an opportunity: how can they help us to better understand the worlds and people that create them?

As is pointed out time and time again, the potential in studying monsters and the monstrous alongside religion is inherent in the origins of the word itself. As one example of this, scholars turn to the Christian theologian Augustine (354–430 CE), who wrote during a time when travelers sent home reports of “monstrous races” from other lands. These included, among others, tales of dog-headed Cynocephali, Sciapodes, and Cyclops. Augustine thus devoted portions of his *City of God* to thinking about how we might make sense of these monstrous creatures—if they really existed—writing, “The term ‘monster,’ people say, plainly comes from *monstrare*, ‘to show,’ and monsters ‘show’ by signifying something” (*City of God* 16.8).⁷ Augustine’s chief concern was whether or not such “monstrous races” were in fact human, simply concluding: “But if the peoples of whom these marvels were written are in truth human beings, then what if God wished to create some peoples of this sort precisely to keep us from thinking ... that the wisdom by which he forms human nature had erred, as if it were the art of some inferior craftsman?” (*City of God* 16.8). If monsters exist, Augustine insisted, their presence in our world is intended *to show us something*: God created them and, accordingly, they demonstrate God’s power (*City of God* 21.8).⁸ By suggesting that the monstrous might be part of God’s plan, Augustine recognized how closely linked the divine, the monstrous, and the human can be.

Monsters prowl the pages of our biblical texts: *Nephilim*, Rahab, Leviathan, Behemoth, beasts, otherworldly horsemen, demons, and the devil (to name only a few). In *Religion and Its Monsters*, a foundational book for the study of biblical monsters, Beal notes that “one might say the Bible is literally riddled with monsters.”⁹ Like Augustine, Beal turns to the etymological root of the word to show

2 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 7.

3 Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 34.

4 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 5.

7 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013).

8 Augustine’s comments are part of his larger discussion of the human body and resurrection. See *City of God* 21.8.

9 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 25. Much of my own thinking about the lines between monsters and the divine is clearly indebted to Beal. Following Beal, scholars have increasingly turned to biblical monsters to ask what they might reveal about the worlds of ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity while also examining how biblical monsters have escaped their scriptural homes—setting up camp in theological treatises, paintings, sculpture, novels, short stories, comics, and on screens big and small—to ask what such monsters, reborn in new contexts, might reveal. For examples, see Brian Doak, *The Last of the Rephaim: Conquest and Cataclysm in the Heroic Ages of Ancient Israel* (Boston: Ilex, 2012); Brandon R. Grafius, *Reading the Bible with Horror* (Fortress Academic/Lexington Books, 2019); Safwat Marzouk, *Egypt as a Monster in the Book of Ezekiel*, FAT 2/76 (Tübingen: Mohr Seibek, 2005).



Amiens Cathedral, Picardy, France. On the central portal, sinners enter the jaws of hell through the mouth of a leviathan or dragon. Manuel/Art Resource, NY.

how monsters might aid our engagement with Scripture, writing “the monster’s religious import is rooted in the word itself ... which sometimes refers to a divine portent that reveals the will or judgment of God or the gods.”¹⁰ “In this sense,” he writes, a “*monstrum* is a message that breaks into this world from the realm of the divine.”¹¹ Yet, he notes, when we meet various biblical monsters we find that they are often—

like other monsters—“*both* demonized and deified, revealing a deep sense of ambivalence about the relation between the monstrous and the divine, and intensifying the sense of paradox.”¹² Gods and monsters often go hand-in-hand.

How closely associated the religious and the monstrous can be is depicted in a scene of the Last Judgment from an entrance to Amiens Cathedral, dated to around 1240 CE. There the damned are led into hell through the jaws of a dragon-like creature, an example of how two of the most famous of the Bible’s monsters—Leviathan and Satan—were merged into one in their history of interpretation as readers began to identify Leviathan described in the book of Job as a symbol for Satan. Yet the stories of Leviathan and Satan found in Scripture are far more complex than this, as each creature appears, disappears, and reappears—always, to borrow from Cohen, in slightly different clothing. In the following pages I first trace the serpentine stories of both Leviathan and Satan in Scripture to illustrate how the writing and rewriting of the monstrous offer us the opportunity to reconsider what we think we know, both about the biblical texts and what Scripture says about humans, monsters, and God. I then turn to an examination of how Satan appears in yet another rewriting—the television series *Lucifer*—which presents us with a 21st century depiction of the devil that takes up many of the questions about monsters and the monstrous that appear in our biblical texts. As we will see, whether biblical monsters appear in the pages of Scripture or on our television screens, they test our assumptions about what Scripture says, reflect the cultures that tell their stories, and provoke us to reassess any too tidy distinctions we might be tempted to draw between humans, monsters, and the divine.

10 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 6–7.

11 Ibid., 7. For similar discussions, see (among others) Asma, *On Monsters*, 13; Leo Braudy, *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds* (New Haven: Yale, 2016), 77.

12 Ibid., 6.



William Blake (1757–1827). Behemoth and Leviathan. Illustration of the Book of Job. Watercolor. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, NY, U.S.A. Photo Credit: The Morgan Library and Museum/Art Resource, NY.

Leviathan

One of the most well-known images of Leviathan is from William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, where God points down from the celestial sphere toward the two monstrous creatures described in Job 40–41: Behemoth and Leviathan. The engraving depicts Leviathan as dragon-like, with giant teeth and a coiled tail, and quotes Job 41:34b, where God says that Leviathan “is a king over all the children of pride” (KJV). In one commentary on Blake's image, an interpreter immediately connects this description of Leviathan to the devil: “pride, the primal sin which caused Lucifer to fall and become Satan.”¹³ As Blake's engraving suggests, Leviathan is one biblical monster who appears and reappears throughout time.¹⁴

Sometimes fleeing, sometimes twisting, sometimes playing, the sea monster originates in the world of the ancient Near East, pops its head out of the water here and there throughout the Hebrew Bible and other non-canonical texts, and then comes to be understood as resurfacing in the New Testament book

of Revelation, albeit with a new name: Satan. As is often noted, these texts depict Leviathan in radically different ways.¹⁵ A brief examination of how Leviathan appears in the book of Psalms and the book of Job illustrate, in miniature, how Leviathan never really dies, but rather reappears, written and rewritten, in new forms.

13 S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 221.

14 For more on Leviathan, see Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 13–70. For a complete examination of Leviathan—from its ancient Near Eastern roots to how the creature has been received throughout the history of interpretation along with other biblical monsters—readers are pointed to *Playing with Leviathan: Interpretation and Reception of Monsters from the Biblical World*, ed. Koert van Bekkum, Jaap Dekker, Henk van de Kamp, and Eric Peels, *Themes in Biblical Narrative Jewish and Christian Traditions* 21 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

15 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 57.

Famously, the book of Psalms offers two portraits of Leviathan. Psalm 74:12–17 recalls how Yahweh created the world, and, in doing so, “crushed the heads of Leviathan” and “gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.” Here Leviathan is depicted as a divine adversary, reflecting the ancient Near Eastern origins of a Canaanite chaos monster known as Lotan, meaning “coiled,” who was destroyed by the god Baal in the Ugaritic *Ba'al Cycle*. In contrast, Psalm 104:24–26 celebrates the wonders of the world created by God, but presents a much different portrait of the dragon:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

Yonder is the sea, great and wide,

creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

There go the ships,

and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

In this psalm, as is often observed, we find a portrait of Leviathan as God’s pet or plaything rather than God’s adversary. As a result of these two different portraits of Leviathan in the book of Psalms, reader after reader has been left to ask: Is Leviathan a divine enemy or a divine pet? Why does God delight in the monstrous at one moment and threaten to annihilate it in the next? And what do we do with a God who delights in the monstrous?

If we move from the book of Psalms to the book of Job, Leviathan swims to the surface once again. The sea monster’s first appearance is when Job finally speaks, beginning by cursing the day he was born and the night he was conceived: “Let those curse it who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan” (Job 3:8). As Job invokes Leviathan, the text illustrates the moveable line between the human and monsters, the way in which a human might “[*identify*] with the monstrous forces of uncreation against the creator God.”¹⁶ When God finally answers Job’s demand for a divine explanation to his suffering (see Job 41:1–34), Leviathan reappears in God’s questions for Job: “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord?” (Job 41:1 [MT 40:25]). As the divine speech continues, God further marvels at Leviathan’s power in Job 41:9–11 (MT 41:1–3):

Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;

were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?

No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.

Who can stand before (*lēpānay*) it?

Who can confront (*hiqdīmanī*) it and be safe?

—under the whole heaven, who (*lî-hû*)?

16 Ibid., 41; italics in original. On Job’s identification with—and desire for the chaos monster—see the larger discussion on pp. 41–43.

However, noting the first-person pronouns that appear in the Hebrew of v. 12 (MT vv. 2–3)—*lēpānay*, “before me,” *hiqdīmanī*, “confront me,” *lī-hū’*, “it is for me”—Beal translates God’s words as: “Who can take a stand before *me*? Who will confront *me*? ... Under all the heavens, *it is mine*.”¹⁷ According to Beal, it appears that “the identity of the monstrous blurs with that of God, and vice versa,” and God sees in this creature something akin to God’s self (v. 25).¹⁸ And so by the end of God’s speech, Job “is overwhelmed by a simultaneously wonderful and terrifying revelation of a *God who does not slay or banish the chaos monster but glories in it and identifies with it as an embodiment of cosmic horror*.”¹⁹

Reading Leviathan with Beal, we witness the way that Scripture acknowledges the continuously moving boundaries between the human, the monstrous, and the divine through Leviathan. In so doing, the biblical presentation of Leviathan challenges us to reconsider what we think we know about the biblical God. Rather than affirming the sometimes-touted idea that God is somehow diametrically opposed to the monstrous—and, indeed, to all things bad or evil—Leviathan shows us that this concept is not found uniformly throughout Scripture. As many have observed, such an attitude toward monsters no doubt results from the cultural context that produced these monstrous bodies: the biblical texts emerge from a polytheistic world where gods competed with one another.²⁰ We see glimpses of this in Leviathan’s appearances in the Hebrew Bible, but we also witness an anxiety about the idea that there might be more than one god: our God, say some biblical writers, ultimately slays the monstrous sea creature that other gods fear (Job 41:25).

As we trace Leviathan’s appearances throughout the Hebrew Bible, like with any good monster story, we find ourselves experiencing both fascination and horror: what if the clear separation we have created between ourselves and monsters, and God and the monstrous, is more porous than we realize? Such fascination and horror continue as readers encounter yet another famous biblical monster: Satan.

Leviathan Meets Satan

The early Christian writer Jerome (c. 347–420 C.E.), commenting on Psalm 104:26, explains:

The Jews say that God has made a mighty dragon called Leviathan which lives in the sea; and when the ocean recedes, they say it is because this dragon is turning over. But let us say that this is the dragon that was cast out of Paradise, that beguiled Eve, and is permitted in this world to make sport of us. How many monks and clerics has it dashed headlong! “They all look to you to give them food in due time,” for all the creatures of God live at His bidding (*Homily 30*).²¹

Here we witness what would become a fairly commonplace harmonization of texts from across the Christian Bible that connects the serpent of Genesis 3, Leviathan, and the dragon of Revelation, merging them into one figure: Satan. By reading these and other biblical texts together, interpreters created a biography for both Leviathan and the devil that is nowhere fleshed out in the Bible itself. Rembrandt’s “Adam and Eve,” which depicts the infamous Tree of Knowledge scene, may reflect such readings. Rather than the usual snake, Rembrandt depicts “a grotesque hybrid monster

17 Ibid., 51.

18 Ibid., 51.

19 Ibid., 48; italics mine.

20 Ibid., 13–22.

21 St. Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome* (1–59 on the Psalms), trans. Sister Marie Ligouri Ewald, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669). *Fall of Man* (1638). Etching. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur/Jörg P. Anders/Art Resource, NY.

with huge clawed feet, hairy legs, bat-like wings, a heavy, rat-like tail, and piercing eyes.”²² And while Rembrandt’s “portrayal of the serpent as a dragon [might be] uncommon for this subject,” the association between Satan and Leviathan is not.²³ Rather, such hybrid readings are another example of how monsters are constantly reborn in new contexts, wearing new clothes.

Much like with Leviathan, Scripture offers us multiple portraits of the monster that would become associated with leading an angelic rebellion: cloven feet, ruling over hell, and multiple appellations, including Satan, Samael, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Leviathan, Lucifer, and the devil (among others).²⁴ And, much like with Leviathan, if we trace how Satan shows up in the biblical texts, we can see how porous the line between human, monster, and the divine can be in Scripture.

As is often noted, the noun *śātān* occurs in a number of places throughout the Hebrew Bible, meaning “adversary” or “accuser.”

At times, it is used to describe a human adversary; David, for example, is called a potential *śātān* by the Philistines (1 Sam 29:4). However, in other texts a *śātān* appears as some kind of divine being. In the book of Numbers, an angel of the LORD sent from God materializes before Balaam, standing “in the road as his adversary (*śātān*)” (Numbers 22:22; see 22:31–32). In Numbers, the angel acts as a *śātān*—an adversary—sent by God. Similarly, the book of Job famously describes how “one day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan (*ha-śātān*) also

22 Shelley Perlove, “The Ferocious Dragon and the Docile Elephant: The Unleashing of Sin in Rembrandt’s Garden” in *Religion, the Supernatural and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe: An Album Amicorum* for Charles Zika, ed. Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger (Boston: Brill, 2015): 287.

23 Ibid.

24 For different histories of the story of the devil/Satan, see Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (New York: Vintage); Jeremy Burton Russell, *The Devil & Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); idem., *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of God in History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); idem., *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil’s Biblical Roots* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

came among them” (Job 1:6). Though often simply translated as “Satan,” the Hebrew literally reads, “the satan,” or, better, “the adversary.” The text clearly presents *ha-šātān* as a member of the heavenly court that God allows to test Job (see Job 1:11–12). These divine beings dubbed *šātān* are agents who work only by God’s command. Yet for many readers, there is something troubling about their presence. Sent from God, these divine adversaries do not necessarily act with good intentions. Just ask Job.

A more familiar devil-like figure appears in non-canonical Jewish and Christian Scriptures, though with many different names. For example, a story in 1 Enoch 6–7 tells of fallen “watchers,” led by an angel named Semjaza (1 Enoch 6:3), who must leave heaven after they have sexual intercourse with human women (1 Enoch 6:1–8). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, a character named Belial leads the “sons of darkness” against the “sons of light” in battle in texts that predict how God—and those of the light—will win (see 1QM; 1QS), while the *Life of Adam and Eve* describes how Satan refused to bow down to Adam upon his creation, which led to Satan’s banishment from God’s presence. These texts paint a fuller portrait of an angelic rebellion against God and a fall from heaven, though such a narrative is never fully fleshed out in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Yet despite their non-canonical status, these stories continue to inform popular understandings of what “the Bible says.”

In the New Testament texts, Satan—also called, among other names, the devil, Beliar, Beelzebub, the tempter, the evil one, and the ruler of demons—appears more clearly as God’s foe. Sometimes Satan appears as an independent—and perhaps evil—figure. For example, Satan is associated with demons: Jesus is accused of being able to cast out demons because he is under the power of “Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Matthew 12:24; see Mark 3:22). In a brief passage in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus alludes to Satan’s fall from heaven, simply noting that he “watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning” (Luke 10:18). Later, Christian interpreters read the Lukan passage alongside Isaiah 14:12:

How you are fallen from heaven,

O Day Star, son of Dawn (*hēlāl ben-šāḥar*)!

How you are cut down to the ground,

you who laid the nations low!

The Hebrew “Day Star” would be translated into Greek as “bringer of dawn,” and then into the Latin as *lucifer*, meaning “light bringer.” Eventually, when Isaiah 14:12 is read with texts like Luke 10:18, the Latin noun becomes a proper name. And so, the devil, also called Satan, becomes Lucifer. By reading these once disparate texts together, interpreters created a backstory for a rebel angel who fell from heaven—now thought of as Satan’s tale—that stretches from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament. At other times the New Testament presents a Satan-figure who might not be working entirely on his own. For example, in the Gospel of Luke we read how “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1–2). Here we might see traces of the Hebrew Bible’s notions of a divinely sent agent of God, who tempts and works to impede right action. As Jesus is led by the Spirit—sent from God—and ends up facing the devil, readers might ask: in what ways does this reflect older ideas where God places a divine adversary in Balaam’s path or allows “the adversary” to provoke Job to wrongdoing?



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569). *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*. Musée d'Art Ancien/Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts/Brussels, Belgium. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

In the final book of the New Testament, John of Patmos describes yet another of the Bible's most famous monsters—a great dragon—in a text that becomes foundational for extra-biblical Satan's biography as rebellious angel:

When war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great

dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him (Rev 12:7–9).

Here the-dragon-turned-Satan “bears a striking resemblance to presentations of Leviathan and the sea monster in the Hebrew Bible.”²⁵ The brevity of the passage allows later interpreters to fill in the gaps. For example, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's “*The Fall of the Rebel Angels*” (1562) is one reimagining of these verses, illustrating how the fallen angels come to be understood as monstrous, with “mussel shells grafted onto a gigantic shrimp, a human head with butterfly wings attached to a shapeless, bloated body, a puffy gnome carrying a sundial and with a plumed helmet on his head, viscous fish with arms, lizard scales, crustacean paws...”²⁶ While the text of Revelation gives us no description of the angels who were “thrown down to earth” with Satan, Bruegel's piece reminds us how easily what was once divine can become demonic.

As with Leviathan, there is no one biblical depiction of Satan. Sometimes a *śāṭān* is sent from God and does God's bidding or, in the case of Job, performs (what might be read as somewhat questionable) acts that are approved by God. Other times, now an independent figure, Satan seems the very opposite of God—a ruler of demons and a great dragon. And in yet other places, the line between Satan and the divine is less clear, as when the Spirit leads Jesus out to be tempted in the wilderness by Satan. This fine gap between the divine, the monstrous, and the human continues to inspire storytellers as they rewrite the story of Satan, who never seems to die but always reappears in—sometimes snazzy—new clothes.

25 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 72.

26 Véronique Bücken, *Museum of Ancient Art: A Selection of Works* (Brussels: Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2001), 88.

A Biblical Monster in Our Time: Lucifer

In the opening scene of the first episode of the television series *Lucifer* (2016–present), the following text appears in white against a black background: “In the beginning ... The angel Lucifer was cast out of Heaven and condemned to rule Hell for all eternity.”²⁷ Sounding much like the beginning of the book of Genesis or the Gospel of John, *Lucifer* sets itself up as “biblical.” The text disappears and is replaced by the following: “Until he decided to take a vacation ...” The next shot pans across the city of Los Angeles, and the camera focuses on a well-dressed man driving a 1962 Chevrolet Corvette C1. Cage the Elephant’s “Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked” plays in the background. This man, viewers soon learn, is none other than Lucifer Morningstar.

In response to the preview for the pilot episode of *Lucifer*, a number of online petitions called for the Fox network to cancel the show. For example, the organization One Million Moms explained how “the program previews mischaracterize Satan, departs from true biblical teachings about him, and inaccurately portrays the beliefs of the Christian faith,” continuing, “by choosing to air this show, Fox is disrespecting Christianity and mocking the Bible.”²⁸ Yet as we have seen, despite the assertion that the preview to *Lucifer* (and its subsequent seasons) “departs from true biblical teachings about him,” there is no complete biography of the devil—by any name—in any early Jewish or Christian text. Rather, *Lucifer* adds to a long list of how Satan finds his way into popular culture, each new story building on the ones that came before it. In fact, *Lucifer* is itself a rewriting of earlier rewritings, based on a comic book character from Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*, which later appeared in Mike Carey’s *Lucifer*. In each of these incarnations, while Satan’s biography draws on Scripture, he—or she in the case of the 2000 remake of *Bedazzled*—is also rewritten, illustrating how our monsters are ever changing and adapting. The story of the devil we think we know is itself a hybrid monster, stitched together from different texts and traditions.

So what does *Lucifer* add to this long line of rewriting the devil? The show follows a now somewhat commonplace trope of the devil as a (potentially) sympathetic character: Lucifer led a rebellion against God in heaven, was banished to hell as punishment and forced to torture the damned, but eventually gets bored and goes on a somewhat permanent vacation to Los Angeles. *Lucifer* traces how the devil spends his time among humans on earth, only occasionally veering into the biblical (the original Eve returns, Lucifer has angelic brothers and sisters, Cain—still doomed to roam the earth with his mark—appears). However, on the whole the show largely focuses on the mundane. In fact, what is extraordinary about *Lucifer* is simply how *ordinary* it is. Despite its conventionality, *Lucifer* provides a(nother) portrait of the devil that draws on biblical and extra-biblical material while also telling the story in a particularly 21st century way, and in doing so introduces charged theological questions into the living rooms of many people who are unlikely to have ventured into the comic book world out of which it grew.

The universe created by *Lucifer* includes the idea of a physically monstrous devil who rules over hell, an idea that many viewers would suggest can be found clearly in the biblical texts. Yet as Lucifer indicates when Detective Chloe Decker—whom he assists in solving crimes—asks whether he enjoyed torturing souls in hell, the origins of the devil’s story that readers are often most familiar with are far more complicated: “It was a job, Detective. Something I was forced to do.” He

27 For an excellent discussion of the way that Gaiman uses various Jewish traditions in *The Sandman*, see Adam Porter, “Neil Gaiman’s Lucifer: Reconsidering Milton’s Satan” in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25 (2013): 175–85.

28 <https://www.christianpost.com/news/one-million-moms-says-new-fox-tv-series-lucifer-mocks-the-bible-starts-petition-urging-for-shows-cancellation.html>.

then adds, “Somebody’s been reading Dante’s *Inferno*.”²⁹ Here Satan acknowledges that the popular conception of the devil torturing souls in hell does not come from the Bible: rather, it can largely be traced to a medieval Italian poem written over a thousand years after the last biblical texts were composed: Dante’s *Inferno*. There Dante depicts a pilgrim’s journey through various layers of hell, where a giant Satan is found frozen in ice in the innermost layer (lines 28–33). Once “fair,” Dante describes the devil as now “foul”; he has a head with three faces, with “two mighty wings stretched out” beneath each face that were “not feathered wings but rather like the ones a bat would have” (lines 34–49). This Satan “wept from his six eyes, and down three chins were dripping tears all mixed with bloody slaver,” and “in each of his three mouths he crunched a sinner” (line 55). As others regularly note, Dante adds to the devil’s biography: now an enormous horrific creature, Satan is at once an image of grief, weeping, but also a monster who eats sinners. The Satan of *Lucifer* follows this trajectory. While the show often depicts Satan in the shape of an ordinary man, *Lucifer* makes it clear that he is more than human. This particular devil has unearthly strength, speed, and reflexes, heals preternaturally, can fly, and has a “pesky supernatural metabolism [that] keeps getting in the way” when he tries to drink away his feelings.³⁰ Additionally, and especially helpful for a police procedural, Lucifer has what comes to be called his “desire mojo.” Repeatedly, Lucifer asks humans—in some form or another—“What is your deepest, darkest desire?” Those asked cannot help but reveal their desires to him and, with this information, Lucifer and Detective Decker are able to solve various crimes. Only rarely does Lucifer’s physical monstrosity appear and then he turns into a stereotypical example of the devil, complete with a serpentine body, bat-like wings, and red skin. For the most part, he can choose when to unveil what he calls his “devil face”—red, scarred, with glowing eyes—to the mortals around him. Like in Dante’s *Inferno*, *Lucifer* tells us that the devil can be monstrous. Yet, much like in Dante’s *Inferno*, the show also suggests Lucifer is grief-stricken.

In addition to Dante’s *Inferno*, *Lucifer* draws—implicitly or explicitly—on another culturally influential source for its depiction of the prince of darkness: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. There, Satan is an unrepentant rebel, and communicates Milton’s personal attitude concerning rebelling against a tyrannical king in his own cultural context. Like Milton’s Satan, Lucifer Morningstar remains unrepentant for leading a rebellion against God, but unlike in *Paradise Lost*, where Satan famously boasts “Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav’n” (*Paradise Lost* 1.263), the series depicts the devil as resentful of his place in hell. In an act of rebellion on earth, Lucifer cuts off his wings and opens a nightclub named “Lux” (“light” in Latin, a play on the name Lucifer), refusing to return to hell.³¹ The show begins by portraying him living a pleasure-seeking life in Los Angeles, making “Faustian deals”—drawing on yet another tradition about the devil in the form of a medieval legend about a man named Faust, who makes a bargain with the devil—with different people in exchange for favors. Yet after he witnesses the murder of a young woman with whom he made a deal—and about whom he cared—he begins his work as a civilian consultant for the Los Angeles Police Department. In other words, when the devil returns in the 21st century’s *Lucifer*, he is recognizable in some ways, but has adapted to the desires and anxieties of a different time and place.

As Lucifer works with various humans to solve typical-to-police-procedural-crimes, the show employs what Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock calls “a central contemporary trend in monstrous

29 *Lucifer*. “Somebody’s Been Reading Dante’s *Inferno*.” Episode 59. Directed by Sam Hill. Written by Ildy Modrovich. Netflix Original. May 8, 2019.

30 *Lucifer*. “Monster.” Episode 19. Directed by Eagle Egilsson. Written by Chris Rafferty. Fox. October 31, 2016.

31 This translation is from John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Irvine, CA: Xist), 2015.

narrative,” that “let[s] monsters tell their own stories, rendering them comprehensible and often sympathetic.”³² By letting the devil share his side of the story—and thus far the series has never made it clear whether he is right or wrong about his understanding of theological history and cosmic justice as the series depicts them—viewers are introduced to a king of hell with recognizably human feelings. Drawing on a modern stereotype about living in Los Angeles, the devil eventually ends up working through his resentment against God for being kicked out of heaven in talk therapy. While the therapist, Dr. Linda, understands Lucifer’s claim that he is the literal devil as a metaphor he uses to come to terms with his past, she uses the metaphor to try to get him to open up. When Linda suggests that perhaps God cast Lucifer out of heaven “to do the most difficult of jobs” as “a gift,” Lucifer responds:

Gift? He shunned me. He vilified me. He made me a torturer! Can you even begin to fathom what it was like? Eons spent providing a place for dead mortals to punish themselves? I mean, why do they blame me for all their little failings? As if I’d spent my days sitting on their shoulder, forcing them to commit acts they’d otherwise find repulsive. ‘Oh, the devil made me do it.’ I have never made any one of them do anything. Never.³³

This characterization of the devil pushes against a Christian theological notion that Lucifer is responsible for sin. Instead, while he does make deals with humans to get them what they want, he claims, “I can’t be held responsible for what happens after I give someone a favor. I mean, if there’s one thing the devil knows, it’s that people need to take responsibility for their own bad behavior.”³⁴ Moreover, when the show focuses on the devil helping to solve crimes that revolve around human theft, murder, and lying, viewers are reminded that “the term *monster* is often applied to human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity.”³⁵ While Lucifer enjoys his role in bringing these “monsters” to justice for their actions, when he is forced to kill his angelic brother, he laments, “I’ve never ... killed anyone before. Only punished those already dead.” Reeling with guilt, he then exclaims, “I’m a monster. A monster who... deserves to be punished.”³⁶ In short, sometimes the devil is most monstrous in *Lucifer* when he acts most *human*. In these ways, *Lucifer* operates, as do many monster narratives, to reveal how shallow the lines between what we understand as human and as monstrous can be, repeatedly emphasizing that our choices might lead us to teetering on the edge of monstrosity or, sometimes, fully embracing our monstrous natures. At the same time, the show also plays with standard ideas about what is good and evil: what if there is no “devil on our shoulder” who causes us to act wickedly? What if humans are the real monsters?

Finally, the show also sometimes engages in charged theological questions, especially focusing on an age-old issue about the nature of the divine. A key theme running throughout is a questioning of divine plans and, implicitly, of free will. When Lucifer muses about the Deity’s nature it is often with both irreverence and, sometimes, theological urgency. For example, in an episode where his

32 Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory” in *Monster Theory: A Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 28.

33 *Lucifer*. “Favorite Son.” Episode 6. Directed by David Paymer. Written by Jason Ning. Fox. February 29, 2016.

34 *Lucifer*. “Sweet Kicks.” Episode 5. Directed by Tim Matheson. Written by Sheri Elwood. Fox. February 22, 2016. In many ways, this idea draws from Jewish traditions about human choice regarding good and bad, an idea that *Lucifer* borrows from Gaiman’s *The Sandman*. For more on Gaiman’s use of Jewish traditions, see Porter, “Neil Gaiman’s Lucifer.”

35 Asma, *On Monsters*, 8.

36 *Lucifer*. “Monster.” Episode 19. Directed by Eagle Egilsson. Written by Chris Rafferty. Fox. October 31, 2016.

new friend, a local priest, dies trying to save a parishioner, Lucifer seems to channel Job in a passionate indictment of the divine: “You cruel, manipulative bastard! Was this all part of Your plan? It’s all just a game to You, isn’t it? Eh?” He continues, “Well, I know punishment, and he did not deserve that. He followed Your stupid rules and it still wasn’t good enough! So, what does it take to please You? Break Your rules and you fall! Follow them and you still lose! Doesn’t matter whether you’re a sinner! Doesn’t matter whether you’re a saint! Nobody can win, so what’s the point?”³⁷ At first this might seem shocking and even blasphemous, but when we read *Lucifer* alongside biblical texts that feature the monstrous, we see that it is in fact more biblical than not. After all, despite Job’s similarly angry outburst, God finds Job—and not his more pious friends—to be in the right (Job 42:7).

Lucifer’s rendering of one of the Bible’s most famous monsters reveals how popular culture can be a “venue for doing theology.”³⁸ On the one hand, *Lucifer* is ordinary and sometimes ridiculous, which the show acknowledges when Lucifer Morningstar writes a song for the detective that includes the words “crime fighting devil, it makes sense, don’t overthink it.”³⁹ On the other hand, the show subtly invites its audience to question the lines we have created between the human, the monstrous, and the divine, much as in the biblical texts where God revels in the monstrous Leviathan or God sends *ha-śāṭān* to test Job.

Conclusion

The many stories of Leviathan and Satan coil around each other, as each of these creatures is born and reborn, their biographies added to in new cultural contexts by new authors. Though both might be called biblical monsters, a closer inspection of Scripture reveals to us that they are not always portrayed as monstrous: Leviathan is, sometimes, a creature God marvels in as he plays in the sea, while the earliest stories of a *śāṭān* are about humans or a divine emissary, not a goat-footed demon who rules hell. The stories of Leviathan and Satan are each serpentine, and, often, the two creatures twist together in the history of interpretation, again showing us—or warning us—of how difficult it can be to categorize the monstrous, as well as reminding us of how monsters are reborn in new clothing and new cultural contexts.

If we trace their stories from the pages of Scripture to our television screens, two of our most famous biblical monsters challenge us to reconsider what it means to be human, monster, and divine. Even when told in the most ordinary ways—like a police procedural that features a crime solving devil—our biblical monsters and their many afterlives push us to (re)explore our assumptions about Scripture, to (re)consider well-rehearsed theological ideas, and, even, to (re)imagine what a story might look like from the point of view of the monster.

37 *Lucifer*. “A Priest Walks Into A Bar.” Episode 9. Directed by David Frazee. Written by Chris Rafferty. Fox. March 21, 2016.

38 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 8. For more examples, see Beal’s work.

39 *Lucifer*. “Candy Morningstar.” Episode 27. Directed by Claudia Yarmy. Written by Jenn Kao. Fox. May 27, 2017.